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ABSTRACT

This document examines various ways for school districts to inform taxpayers about positive educational programs in order to convince them that a particular public school system is worth the investment. A school district needs to create good public relations in order to "sell" taxpayers on an educational program. Thus educators must show that they teach students how to think and how to function in the modern world. Educators need also to provide a stimulating, loving environment for students, while good teachers must be acknowledged. (PB)

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How To Account To Your Public For What Kids Learn

Text by Charles L. Spencer, Jr.
Senior Board Member and Past Chairman
Reynolds School District No. 7
Troutdale, Oregon

Thank you Mrs. Pettit.

I don't know how things are in Ferndale, but I can tell you they are exciting in Troutdale, where the Reynolds School District is located east of Portland, Oregon. We have about 6600 students in nine elementary, two middle, and two high schools -- and a $20 million budget.

We in Oregon have an opportunity to account to our patrons annually because they have to approve our budgets if we go beyond a 6% increase in our tax base, which they must also approve. I call this an opportunity because it keeps us on our toes; it keeps us involved with and mindful of our constituents -- both the pro and the con side.

As we think about accounting to our patrons for what their children learn, there was a young Indian brave and an old Indian chief standing on the corner. As pretty girls would walk by, the brave would smile and say "How". The chief would say "Chance". The young brave looked at the old chief in amazement. "Honored Chief - Indians are supposed to say 'How'." The chief replied: "Me knowem how, me wantum chance!"

Most school board members know how, but they miss the chance. We have to know who our audience is, and the message we want to communicate to them.

Like most school districts today, the larger percentage of our population doesn't have regular school contact because they do not have children in the schools. We have a large number of retired people and we have full retirement projects within our boundaries. With the property taxes supporting our school programs, these fixed income folks always vote and usually it's "no".

Many of these folks have not been in a school for years. Maybe the last time they were in a school, it was not a positive experience. All patrons need to feel at home in the schools because they are supporting them.

EA 016 365

Many of our retirees are blue-collar and do not have a high degree of education themselves; hence, they do not see the need to support education or educational changes and directions that affect our students as they relate to the Oregon economy, that of the Northwest, the country or the world.

These people reflect on the world as they knew it when they were in school. I can recall forty-five kids in a room but I had a loving/caring mother and father, a family atmosphere and no television. I was a poor kid but I didn't know it. My parents didn't have educations but they were going to see to it that I had one. Parents always want things better for their children.

Dr. Dennis Waitley, in his book entitled "The Winners Edge", has a section called -- Correction to Perfection = Planting The Weeds! He states: "As parents and teachers, we have been as responsible for developing the continued guilt trip that has been passed down through the centuries to our children as any other source or any other medium." Dr. Waitley continues: "I don't know about you, but I have always wanted my children to grow up to be real winners, real competitors in the game of life; and to go for it.

"I have six children and the first one took the brunt of my education in parenthood by trial and error. I was always eager to correct them to perfection. When my children were quiet, nice and well-behaved, that was normal and natural and for that they got no response. When they misbehaved or did something wrong, however, I was quick to correct them and point out what they were doing wrong. Pretty soon, they got the idea that doing something wrong was a good way to get attention from their parents."

I'm sure you don't need anyone to talk to you about discipline problems -- whether they are in your home or in your school but your staff is entitled to disciplined children. I believe children want to be disciplined. As an adult, I want to know the rules, too. A discipline policy that is visibly enforced is one of the strongest ways for you to account to your patrons.

Parenthetically, I could almost apply Dr. Waitley's thoughts to school boards. When we are good, nobody notices us. We know we can get attention by being "bad" within the public view. Do we sometimes just stir things up so we will be noticed??

Well, regardless of where you stand on that, one thing you need is a good public relations -- press posture in your community because the press does help mold opinion about your district. That press -- whether your own publication or the local paper or other media -- is probably the basis for your perception by your constituents to a large degree.

Dr. Zacharie Clements, Professor of Education at the University of Vermont, told the Oregon School Boards Association last fall: "We are the only business in the world where not smiling is a national pastime. We think we aren't selling

and don't have to smile or be pleasant or look like we like what we are doing." Obviously, that is not true, but have you looked at your "public" image lately?

How does that "image" project your educational program? Will the voters you are turning out support your school system at the polls in the future? Will they be useful citizens and thank you for the education they received? Have you been imaginative and creative or have you followed in the ruts of your predecessors? Remember -- the only difference between a rut and a grave is depth!

There is a lot of emphasis lately on the Macomb Marketing Plan which uses the motto "Your Public Schools -- There Is No Better Place To Learn". See? We do have a product to sell. Many of us, however, are still operating in industrial or agricultural society molds. There are fewer and fewer people on the farm! Unemployment rates indicate there are fewer in the factories, too.

I'm concerned education will go the way of the auto industry. Detroit simply did not read the public mind. If we don't read the public mind and continue to function as tax guzzling entities, the public will lose faith in us, too. It is estimated that if the voucher system is approved, twenty-nine percent of the students we have today will become enrolled elsewhere.

How do you account to your patrons? Other than discipline, most of them will tell you that they want graduates who can read and write and compute. That's nice, but you teach more than three subject areas. What they are really asking for is students who can compete. But should you do a quick fix and rush for high tech? Oregon is traditionally a timber state. We also move a lot of wheat. It is the least expensive in the world but we fall short in telling that fact. Oregon is a world trader but we lack education to be in the mainstream. Asiatic countries need these products but we don't teach Asiatic languages.

In the February "Journal", Tom Shannon, our Executive Director, points out why we have a void in math by stating: "There has been a 77% decline in the number of secondary school mathematics teachers and a 65% decline in the number of science teachers being trained. 1980 statistics show 54% of our high schools teach trigonometry but only 31% teach calculus. How many have advanced computer classes, I wonder? Now there is an area that you can sell. Seldom, do I walk into an office that isn't using a computer for something!

Our students must become familiar with these modern day "beasts of burden". The head of our high school math department has written programs for all levels. One that impressed me at a recent Board presentation is called "Woozle". It's an elementary program, and if you answer the question correctly, your woozle dances and you experience success. If you answer incorrectly, your woozle gets a sad face but when you correct that answer, your woozle dances because its happy and so are you. Can you imagine the excitement that is carried home? Can you imagine a better way to account to your patrons than to have excited students rushing home to tell their parents what went on in school today?

We simply cannot survive doing things the old way. Our students need a stimulating environment that is loving and protective; they must find accepting, appropriate role models; teachers who give positive reinforcement, consistent discipline and hold realistic expectations -- you get what you expect!

Most of all, we need to sell our product and make people want to buy. A program of recognition and award for outstanding or distinguished teaching sure won't do you any harm. Aren't we capable of competing with private schools? We may have to be creative, innovative, and imaginative but I believe that we are up to it.

Our schools must teach students how to learn. Competency is not enough. Learning by rote won't do. Students need to learn how to learn. That skill will be invaluable all of their lives. Society is changing rapidly and schools can not keep up so they must give students the ability to find out things for themselves.

The Oregon State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Dr. Verne Duncan, recognized this necessity in his "State of the Schools" address last September when he said: "The concept of life-long learning is no longer a luxury for a few -- it's a necessity for all."

The "Three R's" are not enough any longer. Said Dr. Duncan: "The new basics must include the ability to analyze, to solve complex problems, to think critically, to accept more personal responsibility, to continue learning, and to adapt to change."

The National Council of Teachers of English last fall urged its members to teach thinking. It cited three areas: creative thinking that leads to new ideas, logical thinking that forms hypotheses and detects fallacies, and critical thinking that asks questions and makes judgments.

Yes, schools must undergo fundamental changes. We are in a global economy. We quit teaching Latin because there was no demand but when are we going to expand our language program for the demands of a global economy? Oregon's economy is going to be tied to knowing a broader language spectrum than just English. We trade heavily with the Japanese; they know English. It's fortunate because not very many of us know Japanese.

This, then, is the direction public schools must take to survive and produce valuable and contributing members of society whose skills will demonstrate worth in the years to come. That's how you account to your patrons for what your kids learn -- by telling them about the positive programs you have; by selling them on the fact that your public school system is worth the investment.

Remember the itinerant pastor who went from church to church. One day he took his small son with him, and as they walked up the steps of this little church, they were greeted by the offering box. The pastor paused, reached into his wallet, took out a dollar bill, put it in the box, went inside and preached his sermon. At the conclusion of the services, the head deacon thanked the pastor for

his fine, inspirational words and explained that it was the custom of the church to give the pastor the day's offering. He opened the box and gave the pastor back his dollar -- whereupon his small son was heard to say -- "Gee, Dad, if we had put more into it, we would have gotten more out of it."

So, whether you are in Ferndale or Troutdale, when it comes to accounting to your patrons, if you put more into it, you'll get a lot more in return.

Thank you.